

NOTE

PAWNEE NATIVE SUMAC/TOBACCO RESURGENCE

C.R. “Randy” Ledford

2020 Reeves Road

Pawnee, Oklahoma 74958

crloutandabout@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

Research of historical tobacco changes and continuation in current practices has led to recommendations after thoughtful consideration by the Pawnee Nation Agricultural Committee and the Chiefs' Council. Preparation of a native tobacco mixture taught to the author by Boy Chief is explained. Traditionalists recently allowed the use of a native tobacco/native smooth sumac mixture in tribal ceremonies. Because native tobacco is additive-free and has a lower nicotine content, this mixture is considered healthier than commercially marketed tobacco for use in ceremonies.

INTRODUCTION

The Pawnee lived in portions of Nebraska and Kansas but roamed large areas to the west and south. Earth lodges provided homes and ceremonial places. Farming was done by groups of women, men cultivated a specific native tobacco, and there were two main bison hunts, summer and winter, that led them afield on long trails. All Pawnee were knowledgeable botanists to some degree. Their gardens' produce, native plant harvests, and bison were critical to sustenance and survival of the Tskiri(Skiri), Tsawii(Chawi), Kitkahahki(Kitkaharu') and Pitahawirata bands/divisions. By 1875, most of the Pawnee had been relocated to what is now known as Pawnee, Oklahoma. Cultural destruction had been the practice long before their march to Indian Territory. For a chronological history of the Pawnee, see *The Pawnee Indians* by George E. Hyde (1951).

Many native people regard tobacco as sacred as do the Pawnee. Native species of tobacco were used by many tribes across the United States. However, with the introduction of European commercial trade tobacco, well before the Pawnee left their homelands to Oklahoma, the cultivated traditional native tobacco was abandoned. A substitute tobacco was Cultivated Tobacco, Racakihtu, *Nicotiana tabacum* L., which became mainstream and eventually had chemical additives (Kunitz 2016).

The native tobacco cultivated and used by the Pawnee and other tribes of the Missouri River region is known as Indian Tobacco, Raawikaaru, *Nicotiana quadrivalvis* Pursh. The plant is native to California and some adjacent western regions, but not to the northern or southern plains (Gilmore 1977). As a side note, a wild native perennial tobacco, Desert Tobacco, *Nicotiana obtusifolia* M. Martens & Galeotti has been documented in southwestern Oklahoma (TORCH Data Portal 2023).

I am not a Pawnee tribal member, but I have lived in Pawnee, OK for nearly thirty-three years including time spent as the manager of the Pawnee Bill Buffalo Ranch and Museum. I have been fortunate to observe and at times participate in many native practices and am a member of the Pawnee Nation Agricultural Committee.

FROM SEED TO PLANTING

In 2017, I visited with a Pawnee Skiri elder friend, Tom Evans (Kahike=Leader of Expedition), about the Pawnee tobacco once cultivated and the causes for the plant's cultural disappearance and the popularity of commercial substitutes. I obtained seeds of Indian Tobacco, *Nicotiana quadrivalvis*, from California and before long his family and I worked together to cultivate the native tobacco outdoors.

Soon after, I was fortunate to learn about a Pawnee tobacco mixture using native sumac leaves. In early 2022, I and two other Agricultural Committee members proposed that the committee cultivate the native tobacco and provide the product to the Chiefs' Council. The committee decided to sponsor the cultivation of native tobacco in what was called the Chiefs' Garden. I shared a proposal with the Chiefs' Council at a meeting on September 24, 2022, which was unanimously approved.

THE MIXTURE FROM THE ELDER

Tobacco mixtures are as varied as the personal choice of an individual: native plants used, tobacco type, animal grease or oil, amount, and proportions. A person in the company of the Pawnee noted a "Kinnekinnick (sic) mixture: ...is usually comprised of dried leaves of the shumack (sic) and the inner bark of the red willow...the addition of one fourth proportion of tobacco" (Murray 1839).

An old Pawnee story *The Medicine Child and the Beaver Medicine* mentioned sumac:

"The man then reached for his tobacco pouch, which was a skunk skin, and from his bag took out a little pipe, fill it up with sumac leaves and tobacco" (Dorsey 1997).

Also, speaking specifically of *Rhus glabra* L., "In the fall when the leaves turned red, they were gathered and dried for smoking.... (Gillmore 1977).

A friend, Chawi band member, elder and former Chief, Austin Real Rider, Resa'ru' Piiraski (Boy Chief) accepted my request to meet with him. I carried with me a red leaf from a native smooth sumac, Nuppikt=Sour Top, *Rhus glabra*, a common species in Pawnee, OK. He said, "that is the kind I use with tobacco". I shared with him my interest in learning the tobacco mix from him and told him I would be using the healthier traditional native tobacco used by the Pawnee many years ago.

Boy Chief began by saying he obtained the leaves when red - when they are red, they are ready. He allowed the leaflets to dry some and prepared some animal fat to mix with the leaflets. He said he typically used fat from beef kidney as it was most easily available, but went on to say that deer, elk, and especially bison fat was good as it also has a traditional history. The warmed fat is mixed with the leaflets, allowed to dry, and placed outside under full sun if it is a warm day. If that is not possible, heat is applied, but not excessively. Then the chopped tobacco is added, and all ingredients are mixed. I have prepared the mixture numerous times and have found that experience is required for the best results; one must learn by doing. There are some details that I have omitted out of respect.

PROMOTING USE OF HEALTHIER TRADITIONAL TOBACCO

The Pawnee Nation Chiefs' Council, recognized traditionalists, and other tribal members see the benefits of using native tobacco as well as discouraging the personal or ceremonial use of harmful commercial

tobacco products that include additives. The leaves of commercial *Nicotiana tabacum* also have a much higher nicotine content than *N. quadrivalvis* (Kaminski et al. 2020). Tobacco is a sacred plant to be respectfully used. Using the native tobacco as described here, linked to Pawnee history, adheres to tradition and the promotion of a healthier smoke. I donated a portion of the traditional Resa'ru' Piiraski mixture for the

Young Dog Dance, Asaakipiriuru', and it was used in the pipe ceremony November 20, 2020 and November 19, 2023 at the Pawnee Nation Round House. On Saturday, October 21, 2023, during a Pawnee Native American Church Ceremony, the native tobacco mix was used in what is commonly called "the main smoke"



Figure 1 Resa'ru' Piiraski Mixture (Photo by Pam Ledford)

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The logo consists of the letters O, N, P, and R in a highly decorative, cursive script. The letters are interconnected with elegant flourishes, particularly around the 'N' and 'P'. The 'O' is a simple circle with a small tail, while the 'R' has a long, sweeping tail that extends to the right.